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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 000268

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM MC HK

SUBJECT: SOCIAL JUSTICE TRUMPS DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT FOR MACAU REFORMERS

REF: (A) 09 HONG KONG 1807 (B) HONG KONG 101

Classified By: Acting Consul General Christopher Marut for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Although democracy is now at least a topic of discussion in Macau, even the leading advocates of democratic reform see little prospect that the public will push for more democracy in the near term. At most, there might be a transition in the 2013 legislative elections that would change two of the appointed seats in the Legislative Assembly to directly-elected seats. Youth politics are also not a force for democratic reform, with one democratic politician suggesting young graduates were actually well-positioned to benefit from Macau's current economic growth. Democracy not being a mobilizing issue, the proto-democratic New Macau Association continues to focus on grass-roots issues, particularly public housing, income distribution and imported labor.

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Under Discussion  
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¶2. (C) Despite being the only political organization supporting democratic reform in Macau to have gained a seat in the September Legislative Assembly (LA) elections (ref A), the New Macau Association (NMA) recognizes the victory had more to do with smart election tactics than increased popularity among the public. (Note: the NMA's two incumbent legislators, Antonio Ng Kuok-cheong and Au Kam-sam, ran on separate tickets, which allowed them to distribute their vote count broadly enough to seat Paul Chan Wai-chi from Ng's electoral slate. End note.) Recognizing this, NMA's Au told us pushing for greater democratic reform is not NMA's main focus at present. They are nevertheless still visible on the issue: the NMA has already attempted (unsuccessfully) to petition new Chief Executive Fernando Chui Sai-on on democratic reform. The NMA was also able to rally a very respectable 1,000 people to march on Macau Foundation Day (December 20) in support of democracy and livelihood issues and against corruption.

¶3. (C) University of Macau (UM) scholar Eilo Yu Wing-yat told us democracy was now a topic of conversation, although he did not think those participating in the discussion had a particular goal or focus as yet. Though she did not win a seat in the LA, Yu believed UM journalism professor Agnes Lam Iok-fong, who had democratic reform in her electoral platform, had been established as an opinion leader. Her Civic Power organization continues to bill itself as a moderate pro-reform alternative to the "confrontational" NMA. Meanwhile, Yu noted that even the "traditional associations" -- "patriotic" organizations founded with PRC backing during the colonial period that since the handover have become part of the establishment -- now run on platforms promising to "check" the Macau government.

¶4. (C) Macau Polytechnic Institute social work professor Larry So Man-yum agreed there was no mass support to push for democratic reform. Nevertheless, So expressed hope that Macau might make some democratic progress under the Chui administration. Contending that questions were now being asked about the number of appointed LA members (currently seven, with ten members indirectly elected by economic and social sectors and twelve directly elected), he allowed that perhaps two of those seats might become directly elected in the next legislative elections in 2013.

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Callow Youth?  
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¶5. (C) NMA's Au felt Macau youth were not involved in politics the way Hong Kong's "post-80s" were (see ref b), and offered two reasons. First, Au doubted Macau youth have the same developed social consciousness their Hong Kong counterparts evince. Second, while young Hong Kong university graduates were having trouble finding good employment in Hong Kong's established (and still recovering) economy, Au thought young Macau graduates were among the best placed to take advantage of Macau's still-considerable boom. UM's Yu gave the youth more credit, suggesting the post-80s movement in Hong Kong was serving as an example to a university/young graduate population already more actively discussing political issues. That said, Yu did not indicate Macau youth politics was taking on the radical edge seen in Hong Kong.

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Doing Well by Doing Good

¶6. (C) With democracy a distant goal, the NMA continues to focus on livelihood issues, which are its bread-and-butter in the LA and in public mobilization. While the government agreed to fund universal free education, Au pointed to the lack of public housing and the inequitable distribution of the economic benefits of Macau's boom as key grass-roots concerns. Polytechnic's So concurred, noting that, while the median monthly income was MOP 8,000 (about USD 1000), the median dropped to MOP 6,000 (about USD 750) once casino workers (median income MOP 10,000/USD 1250) were factored out. That said, So admitted he could not explain why Macau's gini coefficient was actually going down (a larger number represents a greater societal disparity in wealth).

¶7. (C) While 80 percent of Macau households reported owning their residence, So thinks this represents the older generation, and that new families have difficulty in finding affordable housing. Two issues add to this problem. First, So suggested local business interests were reluctant to see public housing made available that could lower the value of their holdings. Second, there is no land left on which to build in Macau, and So actually thinks the government may be in "debt" to various developers, owing them land in payment for land "swaps." The public will watch recently-approved land reclamation projects closely, So said, looking to see how much of the gain ends up in the hands of vested interests.

MARUT